

THE USE OF BLOGS AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL. THE EXPERIENCE IN THE SUBJECT COMMUNICATION AND LABOR MARKET

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Abstract

This presentation tries to highlight the need to apply virtual communication tools in university learning, putting as an example the use of Blogs in the subject of Communication and Labor market.

Communication and Labor market is a subject whose aim is to bring nearer the world of labor market to students, with the help of communication tools. In this case not only reporting on the existence of certain portals, but mainly through social networks and blogs. First every pupil is taught to create his own blog. Later he is introduced to the dynamics of navigation through posts and links to the blogs of his classmates and the main blog of the subject. Like this the whole classroom is connected in a virtual community, which generates contents and constant feedback and at the same time introduces innovations that are discovered in the network. Thus, the application is double, because on one hand the pupil learns the uses of blogs as a way of communication and, on the other hand, it is himself who directs his own learning.

This way teachers become the guides along this process.

Keywords: Communication, blogs, educational innovation, networks.

1 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the so-called Web 2.0 represents a social revolution rather than a technological one. It's more about attitude than about technology, and it consists in encouraging participation through open services. It's use facilities and accessibility have turned the tools of web 2.0 into an essential complement in the classroom [1].

Among these tools is the use of weblogs, which have shown a great potential as tools for curriculum innovation in the context of university education and contribute to improving the quality of teaching and learning processes. In this aspect, the first experience took place in Harvard University in 2002, followed by Williams and Jacobs in 2004 [2]. Other papers on blog applications are those of Orihuela and Santos at the University of Navarra [3] and Meredith and Tricas's experience with students studying Computer Science [4].

The main characteristics of blogs, that make them so useful in teaching, are their simple use, the fact that they are low cost, the possibility of organizing information according to different criteria (chronological and thematic) and extending contents through links, their interactivity, their cooperative system and the possibility of accessing the blog from anywhere that is connected to the Internet and at any time [5]. They also help students to write their reflections [6], and can be established as a channel of communication between students and teachers, or be used to show the progress of collaborative learning processes [7]. On the other hand, blogs can serve as resource centers where teachers provide contents [8], and students can show their future projects [9].

Blogs are great sources of information and communication channels that facilitate a more autonomous learning and enable greater participation in group activities, which tends to increase the interest and motivation of students. With its editing software, teachers and students can easily develop materials individually or in groups, share them and submit them to comments from other readers. They provide an online space for storage, classification and publication / circulation of textual and audiovisual material that can later be accessed by everyone. They facilitate the implementation of new learning activities and the evaluation and creation of teaching networks. They also develop and improve digital skills, from searching, selecting and processing information to turn it into knowledge, to publishing and broadcasting in diverse media platforms.

All this ends up being a means for the student to experience and control his own learning, promoting collaborative work, and otherwise facilitating an informal student-teacher communication [10].

2 THE SUBJECT OF COMMUNICATION AND LABOR MARKET

This subject is taught in the Degree for Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Alicante and is part of the group of elective subjects in the second cycle. While it is practical in its best part, it is divided in equal parts into theoretical and practical sessions with a total equivalent of 4.5 elective credits that translate into 5.62 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System).

The overall aim of the course is to provide students with information and knowledge on the processes of incorporation into labor market, focusing on the study and training of skills that assure an effective performance in publicity oriented jobs.

The list of topics includes self employment options and job placement, focusing on the realization of a personal and professional itinerary as a first step towards employability. Then it offers different job-searching tools and works on different transversal skills like job interviews, teamwork, curriculum vitae, etc..

From the first moment the practical character of the subject becomes apparent in the intention of providing real and useful resources to students, loading them with new technologies for the search of information on job placement. It starts with the detection of job offers online and finishes with the administration of personal corporative images on Internet, or what is called *personal branding* [11].

The educational contents were designed in collaboration of specialists in human resources and recruitment processes, working together through the University Job Placement Centre at the University of Alicante [12] in order to build bridges between the academic and professional world.

Each class is structured around a single theme that serves as a starting point for the real work that students will have to do, that is, to browse the network visiting the resources proposed and then translating their findings to their personal blogs.

Jose Cuervo [13] defines these blogs as Educablogs: those blogs whose main objective is to support a teaching-learning process in an educational context, adding that in recent years, lots of teachers are using blogs to build personal dynamic webs in a very simple and easy way to share ideas and projects or as a supportive tool for class material.

In our case the extra goal is to place the student in line with the working environment that surrounds him, using modern tools to spark their curiosity.

Lifelong, continuous learning needs new models, new intervention patterns, different synergies that raise new proposals. It needs the development of policies aimed to the development of learning techniques having in mind a time-space dimension[14].

3 THE USE OF BLOGS IN THE SUBJECT

Blogs are used in two different ways in the subject of Communication and Labour Market. On one hand, the teacher prepares a blog with class material, and on the other hand, each student has a personal blog, which presents the outcome of their work.

The teacher's blog is a space in which to accumulate all those digital resources (texts, multimedia, presentations, animations, links, e-books) that are useful for learning. This blog also includes links to all the students's blogs, added with RSS, so the teacher can keep track of updates of weekly papers. It is also a horizontal workspace, a huge source of information that represents an alternative to the traditional and unidirectional hierarchy of learning environments.

The student's blog, also called blogfolio [15] is the space in which to gather information that proves the skills and achievements of students. How they think, analyze, synthesize, produce or create, and interact with other students and the teacher. That is, allows to identify concepts, procedures and attitudes of students.

The blog *Mom, I want to be a scholar*, by a student called Esther Asensio [16], created in 2010-2011, is a clear example of the type of work and development pursued by the subject. First it contains a precise description of the objectives that the student understands her blog must have, useful links to resources related to job searching, listed blogs that serve as references and various options for sharing information through social networks. In terms of contents, it reflects a good job in research and further reflection, accompanied by graphic resources.

Another example are the blogs *Communicating each other* by Sarai Cruz [17], or *My great future*, by Aránzazu Marin [18], with similar characteristics that indicate a growing interest in the use of blogs beyond the context of the subject, a target that is also expected if good resources are available and useful to students.

The most innovative aspect of the teaching methods of this course is not only the need of each student to have his own blogfolio (previously designed and learned to use correctly), but that the evaluation system is based mainly on a continuous improvement of their knowledge in ICT, which helps to achieve a number of additional skills, highly practical and useful for everyday life in this society of information.

Continuous assessment is proposed as an additional option to measure more fully the acquisition of knowledge and skills the subject proposes [19]. Along the line of the 2.0 spirit, personal evaluations of the subject are conducted weekly by monitoring each student's blog, which help from teachers available to solve any technical questions and to consider suggestions depending on the type of material or searching methods that have been used.

Following Schmidt's classification [20], there are three types of evaluation: characteristic's evaluation methods, characteristic's evaluation methods associated with results and stage evaluation methods. The first of these, the characteristic's evaluation method, analyzes the characteristics of the blog, divided into three categories and four types of values. The different categories consist of promotion, provision and processing. As for the temporary values: customized, logistics and sensorial.

The method of characteristics associated to result, as the name suggests, adds to the previous the results associated to each characteristic. And the stage evaluation method takes into account the time spent by the blog creator as an exponent that increases experience. The longer it is, there will be more experiences going through different phases with specific characteristics (González Sánchez, R., and García Muiña, FE, 2010).

In the subject of Communication and Labour Market we apply a hybrid method of continuous assessment that integrates evaluation by stages with evaluation by characteristics. First, every pupil has a personalized record, in which the characteristics to be evaluated and updated on a weekly basis appear. Later, on a monthly basis, the student receives a virtual tutoring with the teacher's comments and suggestions.

This type of assessment encourages the student's interest in the subject and in their own blogs, and the results are evident to the naked eye, in terms of motivation and aesthetic quality and content of their posts.

4 RESULTS

A blog is a communication channel, and a means to gain knowledge and skills. The teacher is the one who transmits and facilitates the process, but the object of teaching is the student, so his opinion is essential for the validation of this tool. Therefore, after finishing the course, we conducted a survey to all students of the subject, who voluntarily responded anonymously to assess levels of satisfaction achieved about the blog and the methodology employed. The overall figures obtained are very positive. The most valued aspects were that participation in blogs strengthens and expands contents, relationships established between the information of the blog and the subject. The various matters taught in the subject and the suggestive contents of the blog, that managed to reinforce the knowledge of students, where also greatly appreciated.

By analyzing open answers, we have identified three reasons that appear dominant when estimating

positively the blog's contribution to improving teaching / learning. First, students say that through the blog the practical exercises have been more enjoyable and have made more easy the development of various thinking skills in relation to the contents of the course. For example, it has been easier to identify main ideas, analyze and synthesize issues, broaden or deepen content, organize ideas, etc.

Second, the creation of participation and interaction processes, both student / teacher and students together is also highly approved. This means, for example, to create and publish contents in comments, dialogue through the comment's system, access the work of other students, get feedback from any comments or corrections made by teachers, etc. .

Thirdly, we have valued the simple access to material and organization for the study of the subject: the publication of materials, the orderly presentation of the same, the accessibility of contents published at any time, anywhere, and facilitation for studying, in general.

Among the most repeated assessments by students are "the flexibility the use of Internet gives in practical exercises, the variety of fields of knowledge that are covered in the agenda and the reflections that various of the practical exercises make you face" . Another student highlighted the "immediate application to the real world that the subject has. It isn't just theory and that's it, everything we learn can be applied to reality" and "we have freedom to organize and make the best of our time. We have the possibility to learn by progressive work and not all at the end of the course with a decisive and stressful test. "

In terms of academic results, and although the average score of this elective course is always high, this course has achieved more than 7 points. Participating students have all passed, the lowest score being a 6.5 and the maximum one a 10. Notably, of 76 students enrolled, only eight did not follow the normal development of the subject, and didn't submit for evaluation.

5 CONCLUSIONS

As noted in our experience, an academic blog is a simple creation that requires little technical expertise and investment of time and money and can be done with the technological means available today. Thus it becomes a powerful tool that allows a flexible communication and interaction with students, which favors the guidance through the basic contents of the subjects, and obtains good student performances using one of their preferred means : Internet.

Using a blog allows teachers to create a virtualized classroom face to face, which integrates and enhances the activities outlined in the context of the physical classroom and the virtual environment. This tool is presented as a unique tool for innovation in teaching, insofar as its use can provide support for the adoption of a model of teaching and student-centered learning, as well as the introduction of new practices based on this model . This results in overcoming purely transmissive paradigms, focused on the teacher and the lectures, as well as instructional designs aimed at promoting participation, interaction and collaboration as the basis of learning. Thus, the integration of a blog in a subject is presented as an instrument to bring about change and improve ideas and teaching experiences.

So on one hand, class blogs serve as a complement to class theory, links and documents, bulletin boards, place of publication in collaboration, feedbacks and memory collections online. The use of blogs helps to enrich and enhance the teaching offered in the physical classroom in many ways. Its use can extend the spatial and temporal limits of physical classrooms because the teaching-learning processes can extend beyond the physical realm and beyond the time frame allotted for the teaching of the subject.

In turn, the input and feedback system characteristic of blogs, as well as the usual inclusion of links, allows teachers and students to communicate with each other for various purposes, such as to answer and raise questions, agree on criteria for conducting group work, etc.. Thus, extending the possibilities of communication helps to create new learning opportunities. It also promotes the continuous evaluation of educational processes, so that teachers and students can verify that the work is done effectively and heads towards achieving the objectives set.

Moreover, the incorporation of a blog provides teachers with the possibility of raising new

methodological strategies, beyond the usual lectures, such as discussions, problem solving or case analysis, expert interviews, development of group projects, etc. . Also, blogs allow the use of new teaching resources represented by hypertext and multimedia digital materials. This approach can help enrich the topic under consideration and at the same time, better adapt to different learning styles of students. The links serve to broaden the topics discussed, deepen them, compare them with counter arguments, etc..

Blogs also increase teacher and student motivation with a minimum investment of time and resources, as with the tools that internet provides one can assure that the students have fun and learn at the same time. It is the student who sets his own pace for learning. This gives them greater autonomy and, therefore, requires for them to have or develop the ability to self-regulate this process, ie plan their work and evaluate its development and its results.

The evaluation done by the students said that the role of a blog was to be a resource for innovation. Indeed, the students agreed that the published materials for activities in that area contributed to facilitate learning.

All this suggests that teaching in a virtual environment training like a blog means two dimensions of innovation, intimately interrelated: first it changes ideas about what is taught and learned, what roles the teacher and the student should take in these processes, and on the other hand, it changes the contents of practical classes, with a proposal for new objectives, learning materials, methodological strategies, assessment strategies, etc..

Still, the use of a blog, by itself, can not be considered a true innovation. This requires that the use of this resource is inserted in a new way of thinking about teaching and learning, compared to the traditional emphasis on the teacher and the contents. In short, the transformative power of ideas and practices that may be associated with the integration of blogs in education, makes them a highly effective tool for innovation and, therefore, to improve educational quality.

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